

# Saint Joseph According to the Gospels



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## **by Father Christopher, C.P.**

### **The Village Tradesman**

The day of salvation was near at hand; and the world, without knowing it, was preparing itself to the coming of its Saviour. Soldiers and statesmen, intent on empire-building, were raising the frame-work of the Kingdom of God. The empire of Alexander had already passed, leaving to the world the language of the Gospel. Now, Rome was breaking down the barriers that separated the nations and laying the roads which would serve to carry the message of salvation to the ends of the earth. And in the little village of Nazareth, hidden away in a corner of Rome's vast empire, a man called Joseph was preparing himself for his part in the great scheme of salvation.

Joseph bar-Jacob - to give him the name by which his neighbours knew him - had an ancestry of which he might have been justly proud. Descended from the royal house of David, he could have claimed a place amongst the first in the land. Actually, he was just a village tradesman, well satisfied with his humble condition, and probably very glad of the obscurity it afforded. In the Palestine of Herod the Great, royal blood was a dangerous heritage, and the lineal descendants of Israel's royal family would naturally have been at pains to escape the notice of the usurper who sat so uneasily on his blood-drenched throne. It may well have been their anxiety to forestall Herod's murderous intentions that tempted Joseph family to abandon their ancestral home in Bethlehem for the safety of a secluded village of distant Galilee. However that may be, when the fullness of time had

come, Joseph was living with his family in Nazareth, earning his livelihood as a tradesman.

In our translations of the Gospels, Joseph is described as a carpenter, but the original texts speak of him simply as a tradesman without specifying his trade. From what can be known of the Palestine of that period, there does not seem to have been, at least in rural parts, any specialized trade that would correspond to our trade of carpentry. Such simple wood-work as was necessary was done by a tradesman, who was something in the nature of a handy-man, and was expected to be able to turn his hand to anything for which skill in the use of tools was required. Tradition does, in fact, attribute to Joseph great versatility in craftsmanship. In the writings of the early Fathers and in the apocryphal Gospels, he is presented in a variety of occupations - building houses, fashioning agriculture implements and household furniture, and even forging metals. In all probability Joseph was just what tradition represents him to have been - a village tradesman who was at the same time carpenter, smith, mason and handy-man in general. In the plans of God every circumstance has its purpose, and it is not too much to suppose that god so arranged the circumstances of Joseph's life that everything in it, and particularly such an important element as his work, should have its part in preparing and fitting him for his future. The mission that awaited him called for physical strength and endurance as well as an indomitable spirit and a resourceful mind. All these and much more Joseph could easily acquire in the strenuous and exacting life of a village tradesman.

It would be interesting to know something of Joseph's home-life and of those intimate social contacts which must have played such a large part in shaping his character and preparing him for his mission. Unfortunately, the Gospels do not provide any information concerning these matters, but

there is reason to suppose that his life at Nazareth was lonely and even unpleasant. Later Christ would have to complain that He was without honour in His own home and amongst His own brethren, and it is not unlikely that Joseph in his time was likewise slighted and misunderstood, and for the same reasons. The people of Nazareth and in particular his own immediate relatives, as we know them from the Gospel, were not only gross and worldly in their outlook, but overbearing in their treatment of those who did not share their opinions. With such people, this man of God could have had very little in common. Indeed, in all matters which affect social intercourse, he and his kinsfolk must have been as poles apart and, considering the temper of these people, it is not improbable that his attitude in religious and political affairs may have isolated him socially and even marked him out for that petty, peevish persecution, so prevalent in village life. Such circumstances would account, at least in part, for what appears to be the distinctive trait of Joseph's character - his patient silence. The few glimpses of him which the Gospels give show him to have been an utterly selfless man, reticent in manner and sparing in words. In those episodes of the Gospel in which he had a part, his presence is felt rather than noticed. No spoken word of his is recorded. In times of distress and doubt, as well as on occasions which provoke from others words of rapturous admiration, Joseph remains silent, keeping his own counsel and speaking only to God to prayer. By his silence he kept his soul, as he was afterwards to keep profane publicity the tremendous secrets with which God would entrust him.

This hard and lonely life was Joseph's preparation for the mission that awaited him. Every circumstance of it had its part in shaping and molding his character, and in schooling him in those virtues which the exercise of his high office would require. The grace of God had, of course, its own part in this process of formation. Catholic theology has always

insisted that, with the exception of Mary, no other creature received so many and such choice graces. But grace is never coercive, and Joseph, like others, had to do his part in his own sanctification. His virtues had to be acquired by unremitting effort and the prayer of desire. When at last God called him to his appointed task, he was, in the words of the Evangelist, "a just man," which title, as Saint John Chrysostom asserts, implies "the possession of all virtues in a perfect degree." In other words, Joseph was a saint. It could not have been otherwise. The man to whom God would entrust His most sacred treasures must first have found great favor in His sight. God found in this village tradesman "a man after His own heart," says Saint Bernard, "to whom He could commit His heart's closest and most sacred secret."

## **The Husband of Mary**

In the village of Nazareth there was another home where Joseph must have been a frequent and welcome visitor. The old couple who lived there - Joachim and Anna - were not only his blood relations, but perhaps of all the people of Nazareth the only ones with whom he had anything in common. Like him, they belonged to "the faithful remnant of Israel" - the very few whose spiritual outlook and aspirations had not been distorted by the prevailing corruption of Israel's ancient faith. But there was another reason why this old couple should have taken this lonely young man to their hearts, and why Joseph, on his part, should have felt himself drawn to them by a bond of sympathy. They too were lonely and had known the bitterness of social disapprobation. For a long time their home had been childless, and consequently shunned by neighbours who, in common with the Jewish people generally, regarded sterility as a manifestation of God's anger. At last, it pleased God to take away their reproach and to give them a daughter whom they called Mary. Like her namesake of old, Anna thanked God by giving

her child back to Him. According to tradition, when Mary was yet a child, her parents presented her to God to serve Him in the Temple, and then returned to their childless home. Would it be too much to suppose that this lonely couple should have looked to their young kinsman for comfort in their old age, and when their end came, committed their orphaned daughter to his care?

This, of course, is mere conjecture, but easier to accept than the ridiculous stories which the apocryphal writers have created to account for the espousals of Joseph and Mary. Giving free rein to their fancy, they make of it a most elaborate affair, calling for lengthy deliberations and proclamations, and entailing many extravagant miracles. But the Providence of God, to which must be attributed the arrangement of this blessed union, has no need of miracles to accomplish its designs. Without any apparent interference in human affairs, God can use the ordinary circumstances of daily life to give effect to His decrees, and in all probability Joseph and Mary were brought together by what may have seemed to be the coincidence of circumstances.

Being an orphan and the sole successor to the family property, Mary would have been constrained by the Law to marry, and to marry within her family, "lest the possession of the children of Israel be mingled from tribe to tribe." Only some such necessity could have driven her to entertain the thought of marriage at all, since she had vowed her virginity to God. As she would afterwards make clear, this vow was dearer to her than lie, and the thought of abandoning it must have caused her great distress. In her perplexity what more natural than that her thoughts should have turned to Joseph? He was of the same family, as the Law required, but more than that - and this to Mary was of supreme importance - he was of kindred spirit, "walking not according to the flesh, but according to the spirit." to him Mary could

trust her life and her virginity. Her choice would, of course, have had to receive the consent of her guardians, but God, in His inscrutable way, could influence the minds of all concerned to bring together this holy couple whom He had predestined for one another from all eternity.

Nevertheless, theirs was not a loveless marriage of convenience. They had known one another for a long time, had shared the secrets of their souls, and loved one another in God. Never before had there been such a union as theirs - a union of pure and God-like love, untainted by any human passion or material consideration.

"Such a holy and perfect union goes far beyond earthly thought; the idea of it could only come from heaven; and, if every marriage reminds us in some degree of the reciprocal love of Christ and His Church, none ever symbolized as theirs that fruitful and virgin union." (De la Broise, "The Blessed Virgin Mary". London. 1917)

In accordance with the marriage customs of the Jews the engagement would have been solemnized in due time by a ceremonial betrothal which took the form of a contract as binding as our marriage vows. When the young couple had, in the presence of witnesses, exchanged gifts as tokens of fidelity, they became legally husband and wife. Custom prescribed, however, that they should continue to live apart in their respective homes for a period set forth in the contract of betrothal. Thus Joseph and Mary, after their betrothals had been solemnized, would have returned to their homes, Mary to the humble dwelling where God's angel would find her, and Joseph to his workshop to prepare a home for his loved one.

It was, perhaps, while busy about this work, lavishing upon it all the skill of his hand and all the love of his heart, that he

was suddenly confronted by a situation which would test to the uttermost his faith in God and his trust in Mary. His betrothed had been visiting her aged kinswoman, Elizabeth, who lived in Judea. On her return, Joseph could not but notice in her the first signs of motherhood. The Evangelist treats the matter briefly and with great delicacy.

"When his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child, of the Holy Ghost. Whereupon Joseph her husband, being a just man and not willing to expose her, was minded to put her away privately."

Joseph's conduct in this painful and perplexing situation manifests the greatness of the man, and deserves careful consideration. The Law required that an unfaithful wife should be publicly exposed and handed over to a criminal court for trial and punishment. The death sentence, prescribed for marital infidelity, was no longer enforced; but even death by stoning would have been a kindness compared with the lifelong shame of public exposure. Had Joseph believed Mary to be unfaithful, he would have had no option but to let the Law take its course. But, however damning the facts might appear, not for one moment did he doubt her fidelity. Trusting her completely, he did not even ask for an explanation, but at once set about finding a way to observe the prescriptions of the Law without doing harm to her good name. He could have written her a bill of divorce, but such a procedure, besides entailing a certain amount of publicity, would have been a reflection on Mary's honour, since it would presuppose that "she did not find favor in his sight for some uncleanness." Consequently he was minded to put her away privately. How this could have done, the Evangelist does not indicate; but it has been suggested that, to protect Mary against the stigma of shame, Joseph was prepared to sacrifice his happiness and his own good name.

"There was but one way of parting with Mary without ruining her...and this was to banish himself, to go and die far off in the land of exile, and to take upon his own head all the odium of such a desertion.... To reconcile together his duty and his humanity, he resolved to tear off with his own hand the crown of his good name to cast it before the feet of that young woman, whose mysterious and inexplicable position filled his heart with sadness, and his life with bitterness." (Orsini. "Life of the Blessed Virgin Mary." Dublin, Ireland. 1886.)

That Joseph would have been capable of such sacrifice, did God require it, cannot be doubted; but, being a man of prayer, he would first have placed himself in the hands of God and awaited in confidence for some indication of His Holy Will. God could have spared him this agony; but since He permitted it, it was for a purpose. It was Joseph's hour of testing when like Abraham he was called to ascend the mount of sacrifice to prove his faith and love. In that testing, this great-souled man proved himself worthy to be the guardian of God's secrets. Even as he put forth his hand to take the sword of sacrifice, God's angel intervened to make known the Divine Will.

"The angel of the Lord appeared to him in sleep, saying: Joseph, Son of David, fear not take unto thee Mary thy wife, for that which is conceived of her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name Jesus. For he shall save his people from their sins."

With such haste as the situation required, Joseph made arrangements for the solemn celebration of their nuptials. On the appointed evening he went, accompanied by 'the friends of the bridegroom,' to escort Mary to her new home where the marriage feast was prepared. Nothing was omitted that custom and convention prescribed; nonetheless he

must have been glad when the last guest had gone and he was left alone to contemplate the Mystery which his little home now enshrined.

## **The Way to Bethlehem**

As the months passed and the time approached to which this holy couple looked forward with mingled hope and dread, the mind of Joseph must have been troubled by a new and distracting problem. It was common knowledge that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Joseph must have known this prophecy and have been at a loss to understand how in the circumstances it could be fulfilled. Another might have taken it upon himself to ensure its fulfillment, but Joseph was too humble to anticipate the counsels of God. Knowing that what was written would come to pass, he was content to wait and to pray that God's Will might be done in His own way and in His own good time.

In due time and in a strange manner, God did make known His Will. One day in the early winter when the first rains had fallen and the people were busy in the fields, an imperial edict was posted in all the villages and towns of Galilee, announcing a census of the population and of household property, and summoning all who were living outside their tribal territory to return to their ancestral homes for purposes of registration. Joseph's doubt was solved and his mind set at ease. He was of the house of David, and Bethlehem was David's city. To Bethlehem, therefore, he must go to comply with Caesar's edict, and that the word of God might be fulfilled.

With his usual promptitude, Joseph made his preparations for a journey which he could not have contemplated without much anxiety because of Mary's delicate condition. With travelling conditions at their best the journey would expose

her to many hardships; but with the winter already set in, and the roads, after the heavy rains, little better than the tracks of mountain streams, it was a journey that would try the endurance of the hardiest traveller. More than a hundred miles of sodden, wind-swept roads, four days of hard travelling in the face of biting winds, and as many nights in cold, comfortless inns with their noisy, rough-spoken crowds - all these lay between Mary and Bethlehem. But when the Will of God was clear, Joseph did not hesitate. Unmindful of himself, and entrusting this dear one to God, he made the best plans he could, leaving nothing undone that could make the journey a little easier for his precious charge. God's loving care would go before them and His angels accompany them, but for all that the winds would be no less cold, nor the roads one whit smoother. No miraculous intervention would lighten the load of care and responsibility which he must carry every step of the way; nor did he expect it. God had directed him and then left him to his own resources. Every difficulty that lay before them, he himself must contend with, and every comfort that Mary will have along the way Joseph must supply.

Tradition has it that Joseph contrived to lessen the hardships of the journey for his young wife by providing her with a donkey; and, indeed, some such mode of conveyance would have been indispensable in the circumstances. But he himself would have to walk all the weary way, watching the while with anxious eye lest the coming of night or a sudden storm might find them far from shelter. After four, perhaps five, such days upon the road, he must have been glad when he breasted the last hill and saw over against him the little town of Bethlehem, set like a gem on the fringe of the wilderness, beckoning them with a welcome that was to prove so false.

Like every town of its size, Bethlehem had its inn which consisted of a courtyard, surrounded by a high wall along which were erected shelters where travellers might spread their rugs and sleep. For the convenience of those who required privacy as well as shelter and were willing to pay for it, there were generally a few closed compartments at the disposal of the inn-keeper. Now that Mary's time was near at hand, and it was necessary to shield her from profane eyes, Joseph no doubt intended to hire one of these compartments; but the census had brought many travellers to Bethlehem, and when he arrived he found that the inn was crowded and all the private apartments already occupied. They would no doubt have received a welcome and a shelter in any of the homes of Bethlehem; but these would have been already overcrowded and in any case could not have provided the privacy which Joseph would have desired for the Sacred Mystery about to be accomplished. Being no stranger to Bethlehem, his thoughts would have turned at once to the caves which were to be found in abundance in the hill-sides near the town. Generally they were used by the shepherds of the district to shelter their flocks, but not infrequently they did duty as temporary dwellings. To one of these Joseph brought his young wife in the gathering dusk of a December evening. According to tradition, it was a stable, and the Holy One that was born there that blessed night was cradled in its straw-lined manger.

Joseph's name has no place in the Gospel's chastely beautiful narrative of the Nativity. He was there, hiding humbly in the shadows of the cave, then as always silent. Even in that great moment when he looked for the first time on His Incarnate God, he uttered no word, adoring in silence the Word made Flesh. Later that night the shepherds came, sent by the angels to adore the new-born Saviour. Did Joseph take their coming as a sign from heaven, approving his

choice of a shepherd's shelter as the birth-place of the Lamb of God?

## **The Way to Jerusalem**

Reading between the lines of the Gospel narratives, it may be gathered that Joseph intended to leave Nazareth and settle down in his ancestral home. Now there was still another reason to set his heart on making his home at Bethlehem. It had become for him a sanctuary, consecrated by a Sacred Mystery. Probably he had property there, and it would not have taken him long to build and furnish such a simple home as he required. But meantime there were other matters of importance to claim his attention.

The Law required that every Jewish man-child, on the eighth day after birth, should be incorporated in the religious society of Israel by the ceremony of circumcision. In this instance, such a ceremony might have been deemed unnecessary and even irreverent; but Joseph, directed no doubt by the Holy Ghost, decided that the Divine Infant should be submitted to the yoke of the Law. It was on this occasion that Mary's husband, exercising for the first time his authority as a father, gave to the Holy One of God the name by which He should be known to men. "Thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins." Even as he uttered that sweet Name for the first time, Joseph saw its meaning traced in the Saviour's blood.

Before another month had passed, Joseph had again occasion to exercise his paternal rights. The Law prescribed that the first-born male child of every mother should be offered to God in the Temple and redeemed by the payment of a ransom to the Temple treasury, and that at the same time the mother should be purified from the defilement symbolically attaching to child-birth. Mary had no need of

such purification, and her Divine Child was above the Law; but Joseph, again interpreting correctly the mind of God, decided that in this as in all things they must submit to the Law, not out of necessity but for obedience sake.

On the appointed day they were early on the road to Jerusalem, and the watchman was still standing on the pinnacle of the Temple waiting to signal the first light of day, when they passed into the city through the Jaffa Gate and up through the still deserted streets to the Temple Mount. With a few others they stood and waited until the triple blast of the silver trumpets announced the coming of another day, and the massive Temple Gates swung slowly on their hinges to admit 'the worshippers of the morning.' In the Temple Courts, white-robed priests hurried here and there, busy with the preparations for the morning sacrifice. No one heeded Mary as she made her way to the Court of the Women and took her place by the Nicanor Gate on the highest of the fifteen steps which led to the Court of Israel. There, with other young mothers, she stood in prayer while the morning sacrifice was offered and the incense kindled on the golden altar in the Holy Place. Then, with the others, she made her offering - a pair of pigeons, the offering of the poor - and followed with reverent attention the sacrificial ritual.

Meantime, Joseph, carrying the Divine Infant, had entered the Court of Israel and there presented Him to God. It must have been a great moment for this simple tradesman when with five pieces of silver, earned by the labour of his hands, he ransomed the Life which God had appointed as the ransom of the world.

Such ceremonies were part of the daily routine of the Temple, calling for little notice; but God would not allow this occasion to pass without indicating the significance of the offering which Joseph had made. Leaving the Temple, they were saluted and addressed by an old man whose lined and

shriveled face shone with the light of another world. Long had this man, Simeon, waited for this day, which God had promised that he should see. Now that it has come and he holds in his trembling arms the Desired of the Ages, his heart overflows in a prayer of thanksgiving, while his spirit soars aloft on the wings of prophecy to the eternal hills, there to watch the light of salvation break across the world. His canticle finished, the old man pauses and looks at Mary. Being a man, he would have gladly finished; but he is a prophet and must speak all that he has been given to see. He must tell this young mother of the sufferings that await her Child, and of the sword of sorrows that will pierce her own soul. With the old man's words resting heavily on their hearts, they left the Temple and returned to their home.

## **The Way of Egypt**

It was not long until the sword of sorrow began to pierce their hearts. Soon their Child would become 'a sign of contradiction,' drawing up on them Herod's murderous hate. Late one evening, when the first stars had appeared and the people of Bethlehem were already gathered in their homes, a strange caravan came up the road from Jerusalem, their camels moving swiftly through the star-lit night. Though they appeared to have come great distances, and wore the dress of far-off lands, the men of the caravan showed none of the hesitancy of strangers. Without any inquiry, they went at once to the home of Joseph and Mary. "And entering, they found the child with Mary his mother, and falling down they adored him; and opening their treasures, they offered him gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh." The visit of the Magi, it may be presumed, did not end with these formal ceremonies. Before they took their leave, they would have spoken of their long journey and their guiding star, of their interview with Herod and his anxiety to discover the newly-born King of the Jews. They could hardly have realized how

this news would alarm Joseph. Only too well did Joseph know that when Herod came it would be to destroy, not to adore. But whatever his suspicions may have been he kept them to himself. It was his way to cast his care upon the Lord; and this was a danger which only the Lord could foresee and avert. The Wise Men went, and Joseph, having placed himself in the hands of God, slept. He knew how to make of his sleep a prayer of trust, and now, as always, it was in his sleep that he received God's directions. "And after they were departed, behold an angel of the Lord appeared in sleep to Joseph, saying, 'Arise, take the child and his mother and fly into Egypt, and be there until I shall tell thee. For it will come to pass that Herod will sick the child to destroy him.'"

It must have been with a heavy heart that Joseph rose up in the night to obey this command. Once more he must take to the road - this time as a hunted man - to seek a new home in a distant and unfriendly land. But the urgency of the situation left little time for thought. Hastily packing the few provisions that were at hand, the fugitives left Bethlehem under cover of the night, and before day break were well on the way to Egypt.

The easiest, if not the shortest way to Egypt would have been the great coast road, which was a busy caravan route with inns at every stage where food and shelter could be obtained. The fugitives, however, would naturally avoid a highway to much frequented and doubtless kept under close observation by Herod's spies. Most probably, they would have taken the Way of the Wilderness which has been in every period of Jewish history the way of fugitives seeking sanctuary in Egypt. Travelling mostly by night, and making high detours to avoid villages, it would have taken them the best part of a week to reach the River of Egypt which marked the limits of Herod's jurisdiction. From this point, the journey would have been more leisurely but still trying, for

they had many weary miles of trackless desert yet to cross before reaching a place where they could make a home.

Where in Egypt Joseph made his home, or how long he remained there, cannot be decided with certainty. Some time after the visit of the Magi, Herod sickened for his lingering and horrible death; and Joseph could not have been much more than two years in exile when an angel came to tell him that the tyrant was no more. It was welcome news for the lonely exiles, not less welcome the angel's command that he should "take the child and his mother and go into the land of Israel."

This time, the man of many journeys can take the road with a light heart and easy mind. But as he approached Palestine and heard from fellow-travellers how matters stood in Judea, his ease of mind gave place to new anxiety. The universal relief at Herod's death was short-lived. Archelaus, his son and successor, had contrived to out-Herod Herod. The province of Judea was seething with discontent, and already one rebellion had ended in wholesale massacre. The angel gave no definite directions, and Joseph, it would seem, had intended to return to Bethlehem; but now he must have had his misgivings. Past experience had given him reason to hope for a divine direction; nor was he disappointed. While sleeping trustfully in the Lord, his angel came to him, directing him to Nazareth. "And being warned in a dream, he withdrew into the district of Galilee. And he came and dwelt in the town called Nazareth."

## **The Way of Authority**

With their return to Nazareth, the Holy Family withdrew into a world of mystery which as provoked and baffled many attempts to discover its secrets. It seems as if it were God's wish that men should respect the privacy of that holy home,

and be content with the little which He has been pleased to reveal. Only one episode of these hidden years has been recorded in the Gospel; but it is sufficient to give us an understanding of the relations which existed between the Persons of this earthly Trinity.

On the occasion of a Passover pilgrimage to Jerusalem, the Boy Jesus remained behind in the city when the caravan set out on its homeward journey. Only at the end of the first day did his parents discover their loss. As soon as it was possible, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking Him along the way and through the city. On the third day they found Him in the Temple in deep discussion with the Doctors of the Law. When they discovered Him, Joseph was as usual silent, but Mary takes it upon herself to request an explanation: "Son, why hast thou done so to us? Behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing."

The whole incident is very revealing. It will be noticed that Mary gives Joseph the first place, and calls him the 'father' of Jesus. An over-scrupulous regard for theological exactitude has denied this title to Joseph; but no such scruple prevailed in the holy home at Nazareth. There he was given not only the title, but all the reverence and submission due to him as head of the family. It is all deep mystery how this humble man could have brought himself to exercise authority over the Holy One of God; but since such was God's will, he would have done so without hesitation, and with a dignity befitting his exalted position. God committed His Divine Son unreservedly to his care, intervening only in circumstances which were beyond human control, but even then respecting Joseph's paternal rights. To him the angel would carry all God's instructions for the safe keeping of the Divine Child. In other matters of importance, Joseph, it may be presumed, was directed by the Holy Ghost, but in such a way as not to interfere with the

free exercise of his authority. In the holy home, as in every home, there had to be a regulated system, and it was Joseph who regulated, appointed tasks and times, made decisions and issued orders.

In a soul so well disposed as was that of Joseph, those years at Nazareth must have wrought wonders of holiness. What a privilege was his! To have always before his eyes "the mystery of Godliness, manifested in the flesh." From the incident of the Three Days' Loss it may be gathered that the Divine Child submitted to all the limitations of human nature, even to those peculiar to childhood. This consideration is here important in as much as it enables us to visualize the world of wonders in which Joseph was privileged to dwell. Watching the Divine Infant make His first stumbling efforts to walk, hearing Him trying to lisp His first words, seeing His first attempt to use the tools of His trade; these must have been for Joseph moments that raised his soul to the heights of contemplation. But for him, as for all, the swift years passed, and the time came when this journey-man of God must prepare for his last journey.

## **The Way of All Flesh**

Joseph was far from being an old man when death came for him. According to the apocryphal writers, he had been many years a centenarian, but that is altogether improbable. Everything considered, it must be supposed that he was still a young man at the time of his marriage to that he could not have been sixty at the time of his death which, it would seem, preceded Christ's public ministry by a number of years. Hardship and anxiety doubtless took their toll of his years, but in all probability his departure from this life was hastened to facilitate the designs of God.

Although there is no information concerning the manner of his passing, Christian tradition has always looked to the death-bed of Joseph as the pattern of the truly happy death. To die in the very arms of Jesus, under the eyes of Mary - such a death could have no terrors. Yet, for him as for all, death was a penalty, and Joseph's death had its own peculiar pain. He could not, as did Saint Paul, count death as gain, hoping to meet Jesus beyond. Death took him from the arms of Jesus from Mary's side to place him among the exiled souls who waited in the other world for the coming of the Saviour. Not for long would he have to wait, but every day of those years of exile would be for him as a thousand years. It had never been his way to consider himself. He had lived to serve, and in dying he continued to serve. It was expedient that he should be no more when Christ manifested Himself to the world. That Christ might increase, he must decrease; and now, as always, he is prepared and glad to do the Will of God, receiving even in death a foretaste of that joy of the Lord which is the reward of the Good and Faithful Servant.

## **The Protector of the Church**

Bossuet, who spoke so well and tenderly of Saint Joseph, was of the opinion that he had a part, passive but none the less real, in the accomplishment of the Mystery of the Incarnation. He wrote

"It is the virginity of Mary that brought Jesus down from heaven...and if it was her purity that made her fruitful, I do not hesitate to affirm that Joseph had his part in this great miracle. This Angelic purity was Mary's possession, but it was given in trust to the just man, Joseph."

Having due regard to the fitness of things, theologians conclude that God has given Joseph his part in bringing that

mystery to its final fruition; that part is nothing else than the continuation and completion of the mission which he performed so perfectly while on earth. As long ago in Bethlehem and Nazareth he kept careful watch over the Infant Saviour and ministered so faithfully to His needs, he now watches over and protects with all a father's loving care Christ's Mystical Body, the Church.

It was always characteristic of Joseph to keep himself in the background. Only when needed did he come forward, then went back to his place in the shadows to await the next call from God. This same trait has characterized his part in the life of the Church. For many centuries his heavenly mission remained unnoticed except by a few chosen souls whose intimacy with Jesus and Mary discovered to them the silent but watchful protector of Christ's brethren and Mary's children. It has been suggested that this long and strange eclipse of Joseph's glory was an arrangement of Providence to prevent possible misunderstanding of Mary's Divine Maternity. That may be, but it is also possible that his mission, being essentially protective, was not recognized until needed. It was not until the dark days which followed Luther's attempt to separate Jesus and Mary that the faithful generally turned to Joseph; and it was in another time of distress, when the Church was beset by dangers, that Saint Joseph was officially proclaimed by Pope Pius IX to be Patron and Protector of the Universal Church.

## **The Glory of Family Life**

The Eternal Father could have provided the Infant Saviour with more than twelve legions of angels for His protection; instead He was content to entrust His helplessness to the shelter of a poor man's home. This divine arrangement had its prophetic significance. The regeneration of humanity, which was begun in the Holy Home at Nazareth, would be

continued and completed in other homes where Christ would continue to live His life of love and holiness. Every truly Christian home is another Nazareth where Jesus mystically lives and grows in the souls of those who are gathered there in His Name; and those who keep those homes share with Saint Joseph the privilege of fostering and guarding Christ's Mystical Life. It is a grand privilege but carries with it great responsibilities. In those days, when there are so many Herods, seeking "the child to destroy him," Catholic parents must look for example, inspiration and help to this great Saint whom the Church invokes as "the Pillar of Families" and "the Glory of Family Life."

## About This eBook

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The cover image is a detail of the painting "Holy Family" by Andrea del Sarto, c.1528, Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Antica, Rome, Italy.

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